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ABSTRACT

This digest defines the concepts of "whole language," "learner-centered," and "participatory," and discusses their application to adult learning in ESL literacy programs. All three approaches advocate that the learner should inform literacy instruction with his or her own particular input, that learners and their background knowledge and experiences should be respected and valued and that learning activities should be relevant to learners' personal situations. The three approaches also differ: "whole language" works from whole to part and emphasizes function over form; "learner-centered" is concerned with collaborative decision-making about the curriculum; and "participatory" focuses on literacy as a vehicle for personal and social change. (Contains 12 references.) (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse on Literacy Education) (LET)

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ERIC Digest

National Clearinghouse on Literacy Education
Current Teams in Adult ESL Literacy

By Ana Huerta-Macias, New Mexico State University

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Current Terms in Adult ESL Literacy

by Ana Huerta-Macías, New Mexico State University

"Whole language," "learner-centered," and "participatory" are terms often heard in discussions of language and literacy learning. They may be used as catchwords without a clear articulation of the underlying concepts to which they refer and of the forms they take in actual literacy programs. This digest defines these concepts and discusses their application to adult learning in ESL literacy programs.

The Whole Language Approach

Ken Goodman is one of the educators most often associated with the term "whole language" and one of the earliest and principle advocates of the whole language approach as we know it today. Goodman (1986) described whole language as a "top-to-bottom," rather than a "bottom-up," view of language learning, a view that does not break language into bits and pieces. Language is taught in real and natural contexts, and thus, language learning is easier and more interesting and relevant to the learner. Rather than depend on basal readers, textbooks, and workbooks that often stress decontextualized language exercises, whole language teachers build on learners' existing knowledge and work with learners on authentic reading and writing activities, such as reading trade books, writing letters, or developing and working on extended writing projects. Learners, therefore, develop control over the mechanics of language through real reading and real writing.

Whole language, however, cannot be reduced to a set of activities or strategies, but instead involves basic assumptions about how students learn. Whole language practitioners believe that language is a social process that is learned as we interact within a given context; that students bring knowledge to the classroom that should be valued, respected, and built upon; that language learning involves risk, and students should be encouraged to try and try again if they fail; and that form follows function in language development and not vice versa.

The whole language movement originated with elementary educators. How can these principles apply to the teaching of adults learning English? A teacher in an adult literacy program can incorporate a whole language approach first by recognizing that most adults already know a great deal about how language works. Even though they may not be able to read or write proficiently in English, adult ESL students come to literacy programs with many years of experiences that have developed their world knowledge, oral language, and reading and writing and have shaped their views of what literacy is and how and why it is learned.

One of the first steps a whole language teacher should take is to share with learners his or her views on how language is learned. The notion that literacy is functional and contextual should be emphasized, as many adults come to the classroom with the notion that literacy is an academic hurdle to overcome rather than a tool for larger goals or everyday needs. Finally, learners should be encouraged to take risks and develop their literacy in ways that are relevant to their personal situations. This elaboration of assumptions about whole language opens the way for the teacher to introduce activities such as journal and letter writing, the language experience approach (see Taylor, 1992), and story writing and publishing, rather than focusing on drills and grammar exercises.

Some educators have learners write personal stories reflecting their experiences—sorrows, joys, problems, and memories—and publish them to use as a basis for additional reading, writing, and discussion activities (see Peyton, 1991, for examples).

Authentic reading that is meaningful and of interest to learners is also part of the whole language approach. As Smith (1983) points out, "The only way to make learning to read easy is to make reading easy" (p.23). By this he means that students learn to read only by reading and focusing on meaning and not primarily focusing on words, pronunciation, speed, or accuracy.

Because standardized tests are not a major part of the whole language classroom, teachers in whole language literacy programs use alternative measures of evaluation that are integrated into the daily classroom activities and thus reflect the use of language in real contexts. Such measures include, for example, the holistic examination of learner stories, learner self-observation forms, and journals. Comprehensive reviews of alternative measures of evaluation in adult ESL and family literacy programs may be found in Holt (in press) and Wrigley (1992).

The Learner-Centered Approach

In a learner-centered approach, "learners are closely involved in the decision-making process regarding the content of the curriculum and how it is taught" (Nunan, 1988, p.2). Jurmo (1989) points out that there are different levels of learner participation. A learner may participate by simply signing up for a course and being physically present. What is aimed for, however, is the highest level of participation, in which learners have considerable control and responsibility for classroom activities.

A learner-centered approach, also referred to as a student-centered or worker-centered approach, involves collaboration between teachers and learners; through ongoing dialogue, they determine the content of the curriculum and the learning objectives. This approach focuses on learners' real-life needs; learner responsibility in setting personal and realistic goals and determining the steps toward achieving those goals; flexibility—as students progress and reflect on their learning, content and goals may be modified; and learner self-assessment.

Learner-centered curriculum development thus differs from traditional curriculum development methods, in which the planning process takes place in advance without student input, and a lockstep order for instruction and evaluation is followed. A learner-centered curriculum complements and extends the whole language approach. It incorporates the notion that literacy is functional and contextual, and it uses learners' background knowledge and expe-

riences as a starting point for curriculum development. It extends whole language beliefs by emphasizing that language learning is a collaborative effort between teacher and learner, characterized by ongoing dialogue to determine the content and learning objectives for the course.

Huerta-Macías (in press) provides an example of a learner-centered orientation in an adult literacy program. A pre-program meeting and individual interviews were held at each program site with those families who had enrolled, to learn about their goals, needs, and interests. The curriculum themes were then designed around the expressed desires of the participating families. This curriculum and the learning activities were modified at several sites during the course of the project, as a result of ongoing dialogue between staff and families and of specific circumstances that developed. At one site, for example, a lesson on plants evolved into a discussion and corresponding learning activities on the medicinal use of herbs and plants, a subject about which the parents knew a lot and which was interesting and relevant to them. At another site, a lesson on personal hygiene was developed because several cases of hepatitis broke out during the project.

The Participatory Approach

The participatory approach was popularized by the work of Paulo Freire, an educator who developed the approach while working with peasant groups in Brazil (see Spener, 1990). Freire stressed in his writings that the prior experiences, knowledge, strengths, and community concerns of the learners must be the starting point for literacy instruction. Freire also stressed the use of literacy development for personal transformation and social action. A participatory approach not only develops words and themes meaningful to learners, but also extends those themes and activities into action that will better the learners' lives.

The term "participatory" is often used interchangeably with "learner-centered." Indeed, the participatory approach is also a learner-centered approach in that the content and learning objectives are determined through ongoing dialogue between teacher and learners. The participatory approach, however, goes beyond a learner-centered approach because it advocates literacy as a vehicle for personal transformation and social change. Learners discuss issues in class that are significant to them and determine ways of dealing with these issues in real life. Learners are seen as agents for change, for bettering their lives and the lives of those close to them. This may involve a parent using literacy to help a child with her schooling or to advocate for the child within the school. Thus, the participatory approach extends the themes discussed in class to action outside the classroom.

Educators have elaborated extensively on the participatory approach to literacy. Auerbach (1992), for example, writes about the importance of social context as a resource that informs literacy development. She notes that if educators define literacy broadly, to include a range of activities and practices that are integrated into the fabric of daily life, the social context becomes a rich resource that can inform rather than impede learning.

Fingeret (1989) defines participatory literacy education as a philosophy and a set of practices "based on the belief that learners—their characteristics, aspirations, backgrounds, and needs—should be at the center of literacy instruction....[Learners] help to define, create, and maintain the program" (p.5). For example, a teacher may learn from a Hispanic family that their children have been raised to value cooperative, rather than individual, work. Thus, rather than viewing the child's hesitancy to engage in competitive behavior in the class in a negative light, the teacher appreciates this cultural difference and provides more opportunities for this child to engage in group work within the class.

An example of the application of a participatory approach to curriculum development in a family literacy program can be seen in Auerbach (1992), who describes a program in Boston. The process, which she stresses is cyclical and not linear, includes listening activities to find student themes; exploration of themes through a variety of activities such as photo stories, oral histories, and language experience stories; extending literacy to action inside and outside of the classroom; and an evaluation process that includes learners reflecting on their own progress.

Conclusion

Whole language, learner-centered, and participatory approaches to literacy instruction are not mutually exclusive. Rather, they are complementary and share basic philosophies. All three approaches advocate that the learner should inform literacy instruction, that learners and their background knowledge and experiences should be respected and valued, and that learning activities should be relevant to learners' personal situations. The three approaches also differ. Whole language works from whole to part and emphasizes function over form; learner-centered is concerned with collaborative decision-making about the curriculum; and participatory focuses on literacy as a vehicle for personal and social change.

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